

8 Grievances, a relevant object of inquiry?

In the previous chapters, I set out to explore grievances in their relation to politico-ideological mobilisation and violence, using three ideal-types, namely socio-economic grievances, ethno-racial grievances and political grievances. The analysis of the interviewees' narratives about their trajectories of engagement revealed that all three ideal-types were relevant. Depending on the context, the background of the interviewee and the type of engagement, some grievances would prevail over others. It should be noted that during the interviews, grievances were enquired about more generally and not specifically to each type. Although it may be that specific enquiry about each ideal-type could have yielded further information, a general enquiry ensured that the narratives contained only grievances that were most naturally prompted by the discussion around the interviewee's engagement.

The findings reveal that, in terms of socio-economic grievances, interviewees are mostly concerned with forms of economic marginalisation and neglect, a lack of efforts to support the weak and economically disadvantaged, strong class inequalities, corruption among the ruling class, dysfunctionalities in the distribution of resources, economic exploitation and the nefarious effects of capitalist societies. Ethnic, racial and religious grievances refer most commonly to specific sectarian hatred, for instance between Alawites and Sunni Muslims in Tripoli, a feeling of collective persecution of a collective defined by race or religion, encapsulated by the notion of *Madhloumiya* or collective victimhood, instances of stigmatisation and criminalisation of Arab-Muslim identities in the context of the War on Terror, and feelings of Othering of Non-White Non-European identities.

When it comes to locally oriented political grievances, the narratives revolve around situations of political marginalisation and exclusion, abuse of power and corruption by the ruling class and state violence, as well as unequal criminalisation of different forms of activism. Globally oriented political grievances refer most commonly to the role of imperialist meddling in the Arab World, colonial projects in the past as well as those in the present, whether in the Palestinian or in the Canadian context. Closely linked to these grievances are sentiments of Anti-Americanism and Anti-Westernism, in all three contexts. Most prominently, these sentiments can be brought back to two major points of contention which are closely intertwined: First, the blatant impunity with which Western powers can invade countries and commit war crimes, most frequently mentioned in relation

to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Second, the perception of double standards and idleness when it comes to the international community, dominated by Western powers: There is a strong cynicism regarding a form of hypocrisy attributed to the international community, which fails to bring perpetrators to justice.

Commonalities between ideal-types

Overall, based on the analysis of the grievances that were identified, it seems like the various forms of grievances share a certain number of characteristics. They may further our understanding of which types of grievances may be relevant for PIM and PIV.

1. **Grievances are historic:** First, grievances, as opposed to short-term indignation about a specific incident, tend to be located in a prolonged experience or witnessing of injustice. In that sense, grievances are inscribed in an analysis of a situation of injustice which has existed in the past, has not been remedied, and therefore continues to produce new instances of suffering. References are made to the fact that the persecution of a particular group has existed for centuries and that the suffering caused in the past has never been completely remedied, accounted for, commemorated or compensated. Whether all the dots can be connected as proposed by the interviewees may be open to debate. What matters, however, is that grievances are embedded in a narrative continuity between past, present, and perhaps even future, which lends grievances a particular gravity. Importantly, the further the grievances relate to events and situations in the past, the blurrier and the more black-and-white the analysis becomes, clearly establishing winners and losers, identifying perpetrators and victims, attributing the roles in a fixed and given setting. This loss of complexity can rarely be remedied in a narrative that is, still, primarily focused on the present and thereby escapes in-depth engagement with the past. The past is occasionally brought in as selective evidence, an aggravating factor, however proper engagement with the narrative about the past is difficult and presented as secondary.
2. **Grievances relate to large-scale suffering:** Grievances do not tend to relate solely to forms of suffering and injustice that are confined to a specific local context. Rather, they present recurring connections to forms of injustice that are regional or transnational in nature, affect entire collectives and that reach into various spheres of civil and political life. A dynamic can be identified throughout the narratives where the analysis of a local dysfunctionality is rarely left standing for itself, but usually, throughout the interview, placed into a larger, if not global, then at least transnational context. For instance, the suffering of Sunni Muslims in Tripoli is put in relation to the suffering of Syrian Sunni Muslims and that of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The suffering of the working class in North America is put in relation to the suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Like the inscription of grievances in a *historic continuity*, the narrative connection between different situations

around the world serves to establish a *spatial continuity*. Thereby, again, grievances are lent credence and legitimacy, but also gravity. In the eyes of the interviewees, fighting the suffering that one sees in the local sphere then gains greater relevance, because the struggle is considered to be the same elsewhere.

3. **Grievances are oriented towards the collective:** Although individuals may be suffering themselves from the injustice or oppression they are denouncing, when grievances are expressed, they tend to concern the collective. Whenever individual suffering is elaborated on in the narratives, it is accompanied by explanations that place it into a larger context. Interviewees seek to clarify that what they are experiencing as individuals is far from limited, individualised suffering, but one that concerns an entire collective. Thereby, narratively, grievances are again given weight, because they are extrapolated to a dimension that surpasses the individual, thereby shielding the interviewee from accusations of idiosyncrasy.
4. **The suffering is the suffering of the weak and the poor:** Another commonality between the various types of grievances is that the injustices they refer to impact those perceived as weak and defenceless. Frequently, the victims that are presented by interviewees are either poor, physically disadvantaged or women and children. The consistency with which women and children are presented as victims of the violence that is being denounced is striking (this will be further discussed in chapter 11 in relation to combat masculinity). The indignation expressed by interviewees is particularly pronounced because they are shocked by the power disbalance between the designated perpetrator of the injustice and the victims. The disbalance increases the sense of injustice in a way that may be less likely were the violence mainly perpetrated between more or less equivalent groups. Narratively, the disbalance serves to clarify the analysis, by clearly designating the different roles and cementing the indisputability of the injustice.
5. **The injustice is flagrant:** Hence, and following from the preceding point, the injustice that the grievances refer to is clear and indisputable. The extreme power disbalance, the gravity, the systematicity or the recurrence of the abuse or the oppression are such that the injustice can only be denounced. There is no room nor a particular need for complexity or nuance given that the injustice committed is of such enormous nature.
6. Finally, and crucially, the **injustice remains unpunished:** The grievances that are expressed refer to situations, events or systems of oppression and abuse that persist because they are either not given enough attention or intentionally connived upon. This is such an essential element to grievances that, without it, grievances would not have a sufficient grounding to persist and to be accepted by others. If the injustice is met in one way or another, especially by an actor perceived as neutral and legitimate, grievances tend to dissipate. Grievances in the narratives are systematically accompanied by expressions of indignation about the impunity of the perpetrators. Narratively, the effect of this aspect is to reinforce the gravity and the salience of the injustice, thereby lending it further clarity.

Relationship between local and global: Glocalising grievances

Another question of interest concerns the relationship between locally and globally oriented grievances. Several authors (Akbarzadeh & Mansouri, 2010; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Mohamedou, 2018) point to the importance of the dialectic between the two ontological levels and the fact that violent political groups tend to be driven by an interplay of grievances that refer to the global and others that refer to the local context. For example, as Akbarzadeh and Mansouri (2010) suggest

Neo-Islamism's notion of global jihad feeds on political grievances of Muslims against the *global* order. The unequal power relations in international affairs represented for example in *global* inaction in the face of Israel's incursion into Lebanon in August 2006, or growing pressures on the Muslim diaspora reflected in the 2004 French law banning hijab from schools [a *local* grievance], are noted as evidence of a global conspiracy against Islam.

(p.11, emphasis added)

Kundnani (2014) writes that 'when some young Muslims are alienated by their own society and see some of the wars the United States and UK governments are fighting, they may come to believe the West is indeed at war with Islam' (p.182). Muslim experts in the French context point to this interplay between the local and the global context as well

the postcolonial reading in terms of colonial fractures is closely tied to a geopolitical reading of jihadism: a violent reaction to the internal neocolonialism (experienced by the youth in French society) is mimetically linked to the international colonialism (experienced by Muslim peoples under Western domination). Of course, the Muslim actors interviewed here do not justify these representations but propose them as a key analytical tool to study the motivations of young Frenchmen radicalised into the jihadist imaginary.¹

(Geisser et al., 2017, pp.198–199)

Based on the collected narratives that were analysed in this study, there seems to be indeed a constant mixing of locally oriented/inspired and globally oriented/inspired grievances. In this sense, the findings suggest a *glocalisation of grievances*. Glocalisation, a term frequently used in economics, denotes the 'simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in contemporary social, political, and economic systems' (Blatter, 2007). The narratives do indeed point to a sort of recurring use of both universalising and particularising tendencies, which produce a sort of *grievance cocktail*, a combination of local and global references, that serve multiple purposes that have been elaborated on above, namely the legitimisation and the reinforcement of grievances.

By referring to globally oriented/inspired grievances, individuals who at least envisage action, seem to be doing two things: on the one hand, they are *individualising* and personalising collective grievances that are present on a global

scale but affect a collective that they adhere to. On the other hand, it seems to allow them to place their own struggle into a global context, a bigger picture. Thereby, their idiosyncratic story is placed into a bigger story, which not only spans across geospatial but also temporal dimensions, reaching back into struggles that preceded them, but form part of their collective memory and awareness. Whether intentionally or not, the grievances are thereby transported outside the individual and the local realm to gain a greater dimension, and therefore justify greater engagement.

The findings further indicate that the equilibrium between the local and the global depends much on the privileges and positionality of the interviewee. Individuals who are living in a conflict-ridden setting such as Tripoli are more likely to point out the locally oriented grievances because they are omnipresent in their everyday lives. On the other hand, individuals living in Switzerland or Canada or Beirut, who are well-educated, healthy and employed, are more frequently referring to grievances that are located outside their immediate environment. However, as several interviewees point out, with increasing political maturity and a prolonged political engagement, there is a point where the analysis turns inwards towards the local dysfunctionalities. This sort of turning point is well described by Kevin

In fact, I remember that at the beginning, my engagement was very internationally oriented. I was interested in these international causes. But slowly I realised that domestically, there were many things that weren't working well. I think this has to do with the fact that the traumas you are personally experiencing are so recurring, so constant, that you are not even experiencing a post-traumatic shock. There was a researcher who spoke about the traumas of the Ghazawi [people of Gaza]. Of course, I would never claim to be a Ghazawi, but the fact that you are experiencing the trauma day in day out has as a result that you don't realise it easily.

(Kevin, Canada)

Decomplexification

Kevin's quote is illustrative of a further aspect, namely the difficulty of engaging with local dysfunctionalities. While the findings confirm this outward-oriented focus across the different forms of engagement, the fact that the local is somehow too present, too close and too recurring, only tells part of the story. Another dimension is the *reduction of complexity* or *decomplexification*. Again, whether intentionally or not, resorting to global grievances provides a narrative about the injustice that is usually less nuanced and also less understood. A situation far away from the interviewee's immediate context, perhaps in a place they have never visited before, is often exposed to less rigorous analysis and engaged with more simplistically. This vagueness facilitates the narrative of a Manichean world, where good and innocent actors are being oppressed by evil powerful ones. Thereby, the narrative of grievances, which combines the global and the local context, can be

strengthened, similarly to the combination of past and present events. Locally oriented grievances are often shaped by too much detail and thus maintain a certain degree of nuances where the image of one designated enemy becomes elusive. By globalising grievances, the narratives are therefore bolstered.

The role that complexity can play when it comes to the decision in which context to intervene is well described by Aziz

If the weapons would one day turn against occupied Palestine, I think I will be one of the first who will be there, physically and mentally. But if the weapons are directed against places where it's not clear what's happening, religiously you can't do that, you will end up in hell. Everything that's unclear, that's scary. If your land is stolen from you, of course you have a 100% right, legally, humanly, internationally, religiously, etc. you are right. It's your land, you are allowed to defend it. Like anyone sitting in his home today, if a thief comes into your home, you can defend yourself. But if a group attacks me, and we confront each other in my neighbour's home, it becomes more complex. I won't participate in anything that is unclear.

(Aziz, Lebanon)

On the other hand, increasing complexity can weaken one's commitment to a group, as Nidhal's quote illustrates

You know...I saw the media news about chemical attacks in Syria, the scenes and stuff. And the fact that Hezbollah was actually fighting alongside the Syrian army...against...now there are complexities of course...but I started asking, what if...what are we doing there?

(Nidhal, Lebanon)

It is as if a characteristic of radicality was the loss of a certain degree of complexity and, ironically, criticality, which, as McManus (2017) suggests, is one of its essential components. A difference can certainly be identified between interviewees with a certain political maturity that has been built over many years and those who engage in PIM or PIV mostly out of a short-term emotion or for the thrill and adventurism it may procure. But, it is true that the narratives, perhaps by essence, have to simplify reality, especially when it refers to the past. In this sense, grievances also resonate with the arguments laid out in the introduction to this book, regarding the essence of violence and the importance of our own gazes in making violence enter our consciousness. In the case of grievances, certain forms of injustice and violence are emphasised over others and embedded in a narrative that provides clarity and gravity. While this seems to be a natural tenet of grievances and narratives, it can of course be exploited using specific framing for specific purposes, as will be discussed below.

Grievances are actively co-constructed

Part II provided a detailed elaboration on the various types of grievances that were identified throughout the narratives. These grievances, relating to causes,

conflicts, situations and events in the Arab World, provide us with an understanding of the underlying drivers of engagement for a particular cause. Grievances are inherently tied to any form of politico-ideological mobilisation and violence. In their essence, PIM and PIV are political reactions to perceived or actual dysfunctions in the world. The narratives collected in this study demonstrate this and corroborate the pertinence of the grievance-based approach. Grievances are the core of PIM and PIV.

Nevertheless, grievances are subject to processes of social construction. The findings that have been presented thus far also indicate that grievances are far from rigid, objective facts that individuals may choose to tap into or not. Rather, they are constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed; they are actively formulated and reformulated; they are engaged with, re-engaged with or disengaged from throughout interviewees' trajectories; they are, in short, subject to various forms of what may be considered *social performances*. Throughout the analysis and the research process over several years, it has become clear that one of the major reasons for public refusal and reluctance to engage properly with grievances is the accusation that grievances are fabricated, overemphasised or instrumentalised. This is a valid concern that is, *per se*, very compatible with social constructivist approaches to human behaviour. Despite or perhaps precisely because of this malleability of grievances, an in-depth engagement with the various ways in which they are acted upon is all the more necessary.

In a way, the following chapters present an understanding of so-called radicalisation processes strictly from the point of view of grievances. While grievances are maintained as a central element in these processes, the way interviewees come to engage with them may vary significantly. Thereby, the position and relevance of grievances in interviewees' trajectories vary from one individual to another. They may be the trigger of the engagement for or interest in a particular cause, but they may also gain relevance only at a later stage of individuals' engagement. Grievances may also be engaged with in different ways throughout an individual's trajectory: they may be the spark of one's interest in a particular cause, but later also be intentionally instrumentalised by the same individual to construct a narrative around the necessity for engagement that targets others. The next part on *performing grievances* aspires to highlight and shed light on this complexity.

Note

- 1 Original in French, author translation.

References

- Akbarzadeh, S., & Mansouri, F. (2010). *Islam and political violence: Muslim diaspora and radicalism in the West* (Vol. 34). IB Tauris.
- Blatter, J. K. (2007). Glocalization. In M. Bevir (ed.), *Encyclopedia of governance*, pp. 357–359.

- Geisser, V., Marongiu-Perria, O., & Smaïl, K. (2017). *Musulmans de France, la grande épreuve: Face au terrorisme*. Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier-Les éditions Ouvrières.
- Hafez, M., & Mullins, C. (2015). The radicalization puzzle: A theoretical synthesis of empirical approaches to homegrown extremism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(11), 958–975.
- Kundnani, A. (2014). *The Muslims are coming!: Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic war on terror*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.
- Mohamedou, M.-M. O. (2018). *A theory of ISIS: Political violence and the transformation of the global order*. London: Pluto Press.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>